

Light of the World - Chapter 3

The Journey to Joy

Text: Luke 2:1-40

“The story of Jesus begins, as does that of John, locally in Israel, in ‘Nazareth, a city in Galilee’ (Luke 1:26), but his birth in the context of the Roman census signals an empire-wide focus. John’s message will be for his fellow Jews; Jesus’ message is not just for the people and land of Israel, but for ‘all the world.’”

The Census: the mention of a decree by the Emperor Augustus “that all the world should be registered” (Luke 2:1) points to the universal focus intended by Luke’s Gospel. The concern is “more theological than historical, for there was no empire-wide census under Augustus.”

The significance of the census is: 1) theological: Luke implicitly contrasts the Kingdom of God with the Roman Empire; 2) symbolic: it provides Luke with an occasion to indicate the Davidic connection to Joseph and why “Jesus of Nazareth” was not born in Nazareth but in Bethlehem; and 3) ethical: it announces that Jesus and his followers are *not* part of a movement intent on military revolt. “Instead of rebelling Mary and Joseph obey the governmental command, no matter the personal hardship.”

The imagery used by Luke in the birth narrative allows him to make “a profound point that many readers today miss because we don’t think about the metaphoric potential of words.” For instance, the term manger is not just a bed of straw; it is a feeding trough. “Mary places her baby where food is found...By locating Jesus in the manger, Luke is anticipating the Communion story.”

“The universal is always anchored in the particular: Jesus is fully located in Jewish geography and Jewish lineage because, as Mary said (1:55), he is the fulfillment of the promises to Israel.” Luke’s claim is straightforward: Israel’s Messiah is also the savior of the world. A key question: what kind of savior is this particular Christ, Jesus of Nazareth? The answer is rooted in the Jewish scriptures.

“The texts that will become the Old Testament typically speak of salvation as an event that occurs in history, as in being saved from war, hunger, disease, plague, and oppression.” Salvation in the New Testament always retains this focus in the Jewish tradition. Tikkun Olam: Repairing the World

“Salvation means that there is respite from whatever oppresses in the community that hears, and lives, the Gospel. Men and women, slaves and free people all come together to say, ‘In our midst, we have a savior.’” This is the “wonderful, joyous good news for all people” (2:10) announced to the shepherds in Luke’s gospel.

The shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem to see the focal point of this joyous good news. When they arrive, they “don’t see a baby that glows in the dark, or one fully verbal, or even one with a complete set of teeth. They see a baby, snuggled in his wrappings. There is nothing particularly special about what their eyes see; there is everything special about how they interpret what they see.”

“Today we see shepherds in every manger scene; the ‘three kings’ are there too, but the Magi are only in Matthew, and Matthew has no manger scene...Luke keeps his eye on one message of the Gospel: the lifting up of the lowly. Matthew offers other concerns: the response of the Gentile nations to this Jewish king...and the clash between earthly and heavenly kingdoms. Luke tells the story through Mary’s experience; Matthew concentrates on Joseph. The gospel takes different forms that will speak to us with different messages at different times.”

“In terms of messianic ideas, the opposition from many Jews to the claims of Jesus’ status should not be a surprise. The dominant Jewish idea at the time (and subsequently) is that the Messiah brings about the messianic age, a time when death no longer has dominion, when there is a general resurrection of the dead, a final judgment, the return of exiles to their homeland, peace on earth. Because Jesus did not bring about this type of salvation, most Jews concluded that he could not be the Messiah. What Christians sometimes call the “Second Coming” looks, to a great extent, like traditional Jewish messianic hopes. The only difference is the identity of the Messiah, who in Jewish tradition is not a divine being to be worshiped, but a representative of the one God.”